Why Worship?
October 31, 1971
Isaiah 6:2-9
Acts 2:42-47
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If you were asked, could you say why you have come here this morning? Could you explain your reasons for being here in worship and not somewhere else? I would guess that you are here for as many different reasons as there are different individuals in this sanctuary. Some people come to worship out of a deep personal need, a need that can't really be explained beyond the statement, "I just need to be there, and feel incomplete if I miss." Some people come to worship out of deep personal hurt - loneliness, broken relationships, grief, tragedy - the sanctuary seems to be the place to bring burdens that are getting too heavy to carry alone. Some people come to worship out of great joy, feeling that the sanctuary is the place to give expression to a happiness too intense and too personal to express anywhere else. Others come out of guilt, feeling that if they don't come a sin has been committed. Some come out of habit, because it's always been that way. And some don't come at all.

I've learned not to generalize about why people go to church, and I bristle a little at the oversimplified indictment that people go to be seen or to impress their neighbors. I've learned that that just isn't so. Because nobody's impressed anymore. Going to church on Sunday morning is not the social ritual it used to be. And I assume that people come because they want to come and feel a need to come.

In any case, I would guess that we come for different reasons: perhaps a complex mixture of the reasons I have suggested. And I think one of the problems with worship is to be found here - in our different motives for coming, and in our widely divergent expectations of what is going to happen in the hour we spend here. Thus, some people can be thrilled, inspired and lifted up, while other people are left quite cold - all on the same Sunday.

This sermon, then, is intended to raise the question of Why Worship? And to set out some ideas of what worship is and what it should be, I invite your response - by taking the time to complete the Worship Worksheet, and by

talking with me at anytime about any of the things we do on Sunday morning. For the basic premis, the fundamental idea, upon which all else hangs, is that worship is something we do together.

The topic is large and I should like to address it briefly, from three vantage points. First, man's universal need to engage in some form of worship. Second, the specific input of the Bible and Christian history. Third, worship in this time and this place by the people of this congregation.

Worship, on the basic, human level, begins with the spirit of man. It is universal. From the edges of recorded history man has wanted and needed to reach out beyond himself, and to give himself to something greater than himself. That something has not always been called God, but it has always been regarded as an ultimate. For the communist, for instance, it is the cause of the proletariat, and the moral demand to submit self to that cause, even to the point of death. The great Nazi rallies at Nuremburg are classic examples of man's need to engage in ritualistic worship of something greater than self.

Worship begins at that point, and again, man's need has been fed by a sense that there is something to worship. Down through history, man has sensed the "other", the "holy", the "mysterium tremendum", the transcendent, the reality out there that defines all other reality. And out of this sense has come the multiplicity of primitive religions, all of which provide man a vehicle to reach out, to step into the unknown.

Worship, I think, begins for us at this level. As such it is always, at least in part, an act of desparation. We do it because we know we must. We do it because we sense, down deep in ourselves, awe and reverence before that which is Holy and Ultimate and Perfect.

That's where it begins, and on this basic human level, it proceeds to gratitude. The Holy - whatever it is, is responsible for the fact that we have life and food, and therefore we are indebted to it. Worship has always, therefore, included the vehicle for expression of man's gratitude, and his indebtedness to the creator.

The Bible incorporates that human level and then adds specifics. The account of Isaiah's experience in the Temple includes this sense of awe at the terrible holiness of God. It portrays man's sense of inadequacy, imperfection and sin. But there it proceeds with a unique idea. God cleanses man. The burning coal enables Isaiah to become more than he was, and suddenly we're dealing with a whole new idea of worship: namely that the Holy - the other - is not vague - but Almighty God, who communicates with man, who sets man right, who has a will, and who has demands that need specific response. "Who will go?" the voice asked. And Isaiah responded, "Here I am - send me."

In the Old Testament worship brings man into touch with the Holy - the God of Israel, and then proceeds to be the vehicle of communication and the arena for man to respond to the will of God. Israelite worship was highly formalized and liturgical. There were great and grand festivals with chanting and singing and trumpets blaring and sacrifices.

The New Testament includes no formal liturgy. The early Christians were Jews and worshipped regularly in the Temple and Synagogues. But as it became clear that Christianity would not be a Jewish sect, a new style began to emerge. The early Christians, as described in Acts 2, gathered regularly for prayer and thanksgiving, and broke bread together. The predominant characteristic of their worship was thanksgiving and joy - they came together to celebrate the fact that Jesus Christ was alive and powerfully present in their lives.

In the Middle Ages the Christian Church defined worship as the Mass, in which the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross was symbolically repeated. Over the centuries a very important shift was taking place. The Mass became the property of the clergy. Laymen came to witness it. Going to Mass was an experience of watching someone else do forbidden things and repeat secret phrases. It retained the sense of awe and mystery but removed completely, any sense of people participating in a corporate act - their act of worship.

That was one of the reasons behind the Protestant Reformation. The

Reformers gave worship back to the people. In Geneva Calvin had people singing and reading the Psalter out loud and listening to the word read and preached. Luther wrote hymns - the greatest of which we sang today, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." And it seemed as if Christian worship would be the honest expression of the whole people of God: their act of faith: their response to God: their giving of self to the God who gave them new life in Jesus Christ.

But history, unfortunately does repeat itself. The Puritans abolished liturgy and symbolism and celebration. And worship again became a spectator sport. People came to listen to a sermon, and intellectual exercise which had a whole lot more to do with man's moral behavior than the goodness and glory of God.

Now, that was a long exercise in history - but a necessary one, I believe, if we are to understand how we got where we are. In the process, man has taken God's place as the object of worship. Worship has come to mean something presented for the edification or emotional satisfaction of the worshipper - but at its beginnings it was an act performed for the glory of God.

That, in a sense is where we are today - carrying the burden of Biblical and Reformation tradition, but stuck with the sterility of the Puritans. We're struggling to get out - to find the forms that are honest and effective and I think the whole church today is filled with a frustration that worship is not as meaningful as it ought to be. New forms are being tried - sometimes successfully, sometimes not. And it seems to me that we will continue to experience frustration in our worship until we learn the basics - that worship is something we do together - for God's sake, not ours.

Soren Kierkegaard was a Danish theologian who pulled out of the church because of the sterility of its worship. He wrote a very helpful analogy. People go to worship, he observed, with the same mind-set that they take to the theater. The congregation is, essentially, an audience. The minister and the choir are the actors. The audience comes to hear, laugh, cry, be entertained, inspired, and the success of the venture depends altogether on the performance

and breath and being. That confrontation reminds us of our own inadequacy and so we confess our sin - together - to God, but also to each other. And we move quickly to the Good News that we are accepted by God: that the Holy is, in fact, the God and Father of Jesus Christ our Savior. And our joy finds expression in the ancient and good words "Glory be to the Father and to the Son."

That's the first phase of our common act: praise, confession, forgiveness and thanksgiving. We sit down: through music we change moods to one of reflection and listening: we pray, together: we hear music - lovingly prepared by our own people: we hear the word read - and we hear that word filtered through the experience, intellect, emotions and voice of the one we have called to be our minister. Then we respond to what we've heard in hymn, creed - and most of all by offering ourselves in the form of our money.

That's the rythm of worship here - from Praise to Confession to forgiveness to thanksgiving: from the word to response and self-giving. It is not the final word: it is not perfect: it will change: but it is here - and it is for you to worship God.

Now for some brief and general reflections. I wish very much that we were flexible enough to break up into small groups and talk with each other at this point. But we're not, and besides if we did it you'd be late getting home, and there is no greater pastoral sin than that.

First - confession. We confess to God because we know that God loves and forgives and accepts us. Our act simply puts us in the posture to feel God's grace. It is also confession to each other for we are a community - a body - a relationship, and our sin is committed in the context of those relationshps.

Second - prayer. As you know, I am not comfortable with the concept of pastoral prayer. We call it the Congregational Prayers and the idea is that I suggest - but we pray together - as a community. You are asked to respond by saying "Amen" - "So be it". That makes it our prayer together. And, I might add, not only here - but always when one person presumes to pray on

behalf of others.

Third - formality. Rituals are intended to help people do together what they could not do individually. They are meant to free men to express themselves. I'm glad for the ritual of saluting the flag and reciting the pledge. It frees me to express myself about my country along with other people. I'm glad for the creed - the Lord's Prayer - the responses - for the same reason. I'm amused by the suggestion that worship ought to be free - because it cannot be - at least for long. The fact is that the most structured rituals of all happen in churches that feel free because they don't print prayers and recite creeds, but end up doing and saying the same things week after week. I think worship needs the fresh wind of freedom - occasionally. I think it can be healthy and good. But it can also become a liturgy very quickly.

Fourth - hymns, a bone of contention with many people. I chose the hymns and to a degree they reflect my taste and I am truly sorry that my cup of tea is not always yours. But I try, also, to chose hymns that are appropriate, that tie in with the sermon, that are honest theologically and will help us to say something significant together. I would ask you to think about the words of the hymns, and most of all I would ask you to sing them as an act of worship. The volume of the hymns is a product of my feeling that we need to be thrilled and awed and sometimes startled. It is not because the organist has a heavy foot. We have discovered an accoustical problem and will attempt to deal with it. But the music of the organ is meant for celebration, for joy and the outpouring of the spirits here engaged in addressing Almighty God.

Finally - I invite you to a renewal of worship here at Bethany Church.

I invite you to a sense of awe before the Holy, the King of Creation, the Lord God Almighty. One of my favorite quotes is by the late Dag Hammarskjold. He said: "God does not die on the day we cease to believe in a personal deity, but we die on the day we cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason." [Markings, p. 56] I invite you to a new sense of wonder.

I invite you to a new level of participation. I urge you to come on Sunday morning to do something - to extend yourself - to pray and sing and respond as if you mean it; as if it matters. I invite you to regard the stranger beside you as your brother who needs you, and whom you need - in order for the worship of this church to be complete.

I invite you to joy. We are here because the news is good. God is good. The world is good. No matter what is happening to us, God is with us. He loves us and walks with us. And he listens as we join our voices in worship together.

I invite you to joy - awe and participation. And I invite you, here and now to help me conclude this sermon with a resounding "Amen".

Amen.